

seemed the worst time for a novice writer to turn his back on interplanetary travel and set off in a radically new direction, inwards into the mind and deep time rather than outwards into deep space. But right from the start – and this was only my third story – I was convinced that to survive science fiction needed to keep one step ahead of reality. If the Space Age had arrived for the rest of the world, for the science-fiction writer it was over. “The Concentration City” is the first story of what I termed Inner Space, the picture of a super-city that is almost literally an infinitely expanded brain.

– From *The Best of J. G. Ballard* (1977)

“Manhole 69” (November 1957)

“Manhole 69” is another inner space story. Here the subject is psycho-surgery, of a particularly sinister kind. In the ten years after World War II everyone was becoming more and more aware of the widespread increase of advanced techniques for the direct manipulation of the mind – brain-washing, pre-frontal lobotomy, the use of new drug-families such as the tranquillizers and synthetic hallucinogens. “Manhole 69” takes a look at what seems to be a responsible scientific attempt to eliminate the function of sleep. The title, by the way, is the name of a complex type of self-regulating manhole used in deep-level drainage systems which shuts off the flow when the pressure becomes too great.

– From *The Best of J. G. Ballard* (1977)

“The Waiting Grounds” (November 1959)

What particularly interests me about science fiction is the opportunity it gives for experimenting with scientific or psycho-literary ideas which have little or no connection with the world of fiction, such as, say, coded sleep or the time zone. But just as psychologists are now building models of anxiety neuroses and withdrawal states in the form of verbal diagrams – translating scientific hypothesis into literary construction – so I see a good science-fiction story [as] a model of some psychic image, the truth of which gives the story its merit. Examples are *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, *Limbo '90* and Henry Kuttner's “Dream's End.”

In general stories with interplanetary backgrounds show too little originality, too much self-imitation. More important, the characters seem to lack any sense of cosmic awe – spanning the whole of space and time without a glimmer of

responsibility. It's just this sense of cosmic responsibility, the attempt to grasp the moral dimensions of the universe, that I've tried to describe in “The Waiting Grounds.” Seen as a psycho-literary model, perhaps it represents the old conundrum of the ant searching hopelessly for the end of an infinite pathway around the surface of a sphere. “The Waiting Grounds” offers it a solution, implies that instead of crawling on and on it will find the pathway's end if it just sits still.

– From “J. G. Ballard, Middlesex” (*New Worlds* no. 88, November 1959)

“The Waiting Grounds” is among the few of my stories set on an alien planet. The idea that we in this solar system may be late-comers to a universe whose life is virtually over has always intrigued me, though given a cyclical view of things it may be hard to decide whether we are the last guests at a party or the first to arrive at the next. One problem which I had to face, like all sf writers, was how to describe the aliens. The answer, of course, is...

– From *The Best of J. G. Ballard* (1977)

“The Sound-Sweep”

(February 1960)

“The Sound-Sweep” is the longest of the stories I have written, and in some ways – especially in the relationship between the ageing opera star and the young mute sound-sweep – is more like a novel. Many of my short stories have been extremely long by the standards of the genre,

and I sometimes think that I began by writing novels in the form of short stories (“The Sound-Sweep,” “Chronopolis” and “The Voices of Time”), and then went on to write short stories in the form of novels – *Concrete Island* and *High-Rise*. Perhaps if I have the time one day I will rewrite them all and get everything the right way round.

– From *The Best of J. G. Ballard* (1977)

“Chronopolis” (June 1960)

By 1960, when “Chronopolis” was published, post-war austerity was over and England was showing all the strains of the consumer-goods society – overloaded transit systems, ruthless competition for housing, soaring urban populations, and the sense that the whole of a city like London might seize up in a gigantic physical and mental traffic jam. One way of controlling a huge metropolitan population might be by rationing time as well as space, particularly as psychological control systems are so effective because they play on barely understood and paradoxical needs. In “Chronopolis” those who have overthrown one external tyranny soon substitute an internal one.

– From *The Best of J. G. Ballard* (1977)

“The Voices of Time”

(October 1960)

If I were asked to pick one piece of fiction to represent my entire output of seven novels and 92 short stories it would be “The Voices of Time,” not because it is the best (I leave that for the reader to judge), but because it contains almost all the themes of my writing – the sense of isolation within the infinite time and space of the universe, the biological fantasies and the attempt to read the complex codes represented by drained swimming pools and abandoned airfields, and above all the determination to break out of a deepening psychological entropy and make some kind of private peace with the unseen powers of the universe.

– From *The Best of J. G. Ballard* (1977)

“The Overloaded Man”

(July 1961)

How far is everything one writes autobiographical? “The Overloaded Man” was the first story in which I described a modern marriage in more or less realistic terms, and it prefigures many of the relationships (or confrontations, more exactly) between men and women which appear in my later writing. I

gather it is some emblematic thing, using the term ‘tomb-robber’ and all. You're stealing the chance to do it, aren't you? Stealing the privilege. The mystery of another age. Some said it's rites of passage. The tombs are here, they said. Intact. Penetrable yet at the same time impenetrable ultimately. One age scorning another.”

“Scorning? They said that?” Beni found it hard to imagine any of those bluff or dour survivors back in town saying that. He was impressed anew. “But, Dormeuse, you're the one who must feel something like that surely. Scorn.”

“A sentry profile can't. I'm just a print of my original; my job is to represent my occupant's self. Keep her safe. Or me, depending on how you view architectural psychonics.”

“But no body, I'm told. Just the stored personality index.”

“Ah, little hunter. I recognize a question when I hear it. One age does plunder another. You, too, would have my secrets. Perhaps that is what you come for, the chance to steal knowledge of my day, get the old sentry intercepts talking. Yet such a risk. Death and injury on the chance of just a little something more about the Tastan past.”

A stab of youthful defiance surged up, made Beni want to stay silent then, but, like countless others before him, he did want to know. He had to ask. “Your body is here?”

“Curious and stubborn, like all who come calling. Why should I tell? Perhaps the people of my day did preserve the body as well. Or the head. Who knows? We may have had cryonics long before we could code personality. The others you spoke to said what?”

“Dormeuse, I'm new to this. A lot of the veterans in town won't talk to me. They only sell what they know. I can't afford them.”

“But, little one, you're in this far. I know you won't believe me but you're past the Stones. You're very well prepared tech-wise, my systems show. You've accessed a third-level intercept response from me. I frankly didn't expect that. You have to have the advice of others.”

Beni felt his heart pounding. Could it be true? In this far! Free of the Stones. Could it?

“Ramirez,” he said, deciding she'd probably guessed it already. “One day he stopped on the way past my family's farm. I was in the orchard. I reminded him of a son he'd lost, he said. He told me things about the tombs. About your tomb. He was giving it up at last, he said, going away. But he told me of you, Dormeuse. Of all the tombs yours was the one, he said. He was an eidetic, as you probably guessed. Perfect recall. Helped him with variants in the tomb plans when there were some, but more with the characteristics of the intercepts, their features and mode changes. He drew your likeness for me. Your image's likeness.”

“Why, Beni. Don't tell me you're infatuated? In love?”

“It's not that! It's complex. I was without a father. He was without a son. We just talked.”

“Oh stop! Stop! Don't tell me. And I became mother

and wife! I love it. Midwife to hunters.”

Beni clenched his jaws in anger. They walked in silence a while down the ceramic corridor, him concentrating on his plan readings, glancing up at the passage ahead, glancing back down, up, down, she flowing beside him, a spindle of light with eyes like onyx.

“You said it was complex,” she said after a time, coaxing, sounding just contrite enough. Perhaps he had accessed a new mode from her.

“Then I don't know why I'm here. All my life it was what the best of us did. The tombs were something you couldn't ignore, how's that? I've walked past yours probably a thousand times. More than a thousand over the years. Yesterday I finally decided to try. Today I came out here again.”

“Your point, little hunter?”

“Our own culture formed around the leavings of yours, Dormeuse, but yours keeps intruding. Your language has virtually replaced ours. Do you know how insufferable something like that is? Can you imagine how it's become for us? Competing with our past?”

“You're telling me, little one. I'm sure it's happened before. I seem to recall something about the European Renaissance being in effect a rediscovery of the wisdoms of earlier civilizations in Greece and Egypt. Though I believe that was a very positive thing, probably nothing as desperate as this.”

Despite her disparaging words, Beni preferred this mode, this kind of directness. Ramirez had told him to push for it, that the host would treat him differently once he accessed it.

“My father died over in 37. Left our orchard one day, just upped and turned tomb-robber, tomb-visitor, whatever term covers it. It's what more and more of us do. Spent all we had on maps, comp and the best sentry tech he could get. I didn't find out till later! A neighbour came over and told me he hadn't come out of 37. I didn't even know he'd gone in, been planning it all those years. So I ask you: why would he do that? Why do any of us?”

“But I'm asking you that, little hunter.”

“Don't call me that. I'm Beni.”

“Beni. So as well as being in love you're in hate and loss. Potent mixture. Think of it though. I'm 500 years in your past, yet held accountable, made responsible somehow for a boy losing his father centuries later. And, marvellous paradox, without me, without the loss and envy, it seems your life, all your lives, would be lacking in purpose.”

“That's not it.”

“Would be meaningless.”

“That's not it!” The cry was swallowed in the ebbing, flowing, warm ceramic night. The thief had stopped walking at last, stood grimly silent. The ghost hovered, drifted, spoke.

“Maybe not. But perhaps you fear so. All your people. So you come here and test yourselves, steep yourselves in the mystery, could that be it? Plunder us from time to time. Carry out acts of astonishing vandalism.”

“I haven't done that.” Beni started walking again,

